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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [KISL](#)  
SUBJECT: ISLAM CONFERENCE ENDS WITH HIGH MARKS FROM  
GERMANY'S DIVERSE MUSLIM COMMUNITY

REF: A. LEIPZIG 18  
[1](#)B. BERLIN 398

Classified By: Acting Political Section Chief Stan Otto for reasons 1.4  
(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) The Islam Conference ended with its fourth and final meeting on June 25 with supporters and critics of the conference representing a diverse Muslim community calling for its continuation, citing the importance of the dialogue that was begun. Interior Minister Schaeuble (CDU), who initiated the Conference in September 2006 to improve dialogue between the German government and Germany's approximately four million Muslims, emphasized that the Conference had "fundamentally changed the relationship between the state and (Germany's) Muslim communities and initiated an integration process." It is as yet unclear whether after the September 27 elections a new government will continue the Conference. While the Conference produced limited concrete results, Schaeuble commented that "we accomplished more than we originally expected." Both he and Chancellor Angela Merkel (CDU) advocated that the conference continue. The Interior Ministry published a 32-page document on the results and recommendations of the conference's working groups which addressed a range of issues related to Muslim integration and societal treatment of the Muslim population. The positive media coverage of the Conference, however, has been recently overshadowed by the July 1 fatal stabbing of an Egyptian woman in a Dresden court by a Russian-German man with apparent anti-Muslim views (ref A). An Interior Ministry contact who worked closely on the Conference expressed his personal disappointment with politicians' and the government's late and, what he termed, "deficient" reaction to the murder. End summary.

Hard Part is Over  
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[1](#)2. (SBU) Germany's Islam Conference ended June 25 with its diverse Muslim membership -- from conservative Muslim religious associations to secular, feminist individuals -- calling for its continuation. An Interior Ministry press release on the Conference's end states that: "For the first time in the history of the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Islam Conference created a national framework for the dialogue with Muslims living in Germany." Participants of the Conference included representatives of the federal and state governments, local authorities, Muslim organizations as well as independent individual Muslim representatives. Ali Aslan, Interior Ministry Policy and Media Advisor who worked closely with Minister Schaeuble on the Conference and who has a Turkish-German background, told Poloff June 26 that the Conference "brought together people who never would have met and created a climate where views could be exchanged." Aslan noted that the climate of the Conference had distinctly changed since its establishment in September 2006 from one of hostility and distrust, where it was a taboo to discuss certain issues such as security, to one of trust and tolerance where members could discuss most anything. He noted that now even local police are engaging actively with

Muslim groups.

¶3. (SBU) Conference member Seyran Ates, a German feminist lawyer of Turkish-Kurdish background who considers herself secular, echoed Aslan's views in a separate meeting with Poloff and Pol LES on July 2. According to Ates, the Conference was a "great success because it brought together all kinds of Muslim groups to talk to the government" and in doing so, the government learned about the composition of the Muslim community. She called for the creation of EU-wide conference. Head of the Central Council of Muslims in Germany and Conference participant Axel Ayub Koehler admitted that there had been some tough discussions, but he called for the continuation of the Conference. "There was a strong intent on the part of all (participants) to continue," Aslan said. He added, "Many feel that the Conference is just getting started." Schaeuble himself called for the continuation of the Conference, noting that it had achieved more than he had expected at its initiation.

#### An Unexpected Advocate

¶4. (SBU) MOI Schaeuble, who belongs to the more conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU), Chancellor Merkel's party, was not always viewed as a promoter of Muslim views and perspectives and of greater governmental and societal attention to these issues. Over the past three years, he had also been the focus of criticism from Conference members. At the Conference's end, however, he was praised by many of its participants for taking the initiative and moving certain recommendations forward. Aslan commented that he sympathized

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with the next Interior Minister for the hard work he/she would have filling Schaeuble's shoes in continuing the Conference. Ates praised Schaeuble as well, saying that she would like to see him continue leading the Conference both for continuity's sake and because "he really understood the essence of the problem(s)" facing the Muslim community. Ates noted that the CDU has usually taken a more conservative approach toward integration. She noted, however, that the CDU had shown that it has "learned something" from the conference. Chancellor Merkel also highlighted the importance of the Conference's work during a breakfast the Chancellery held for the Conference participants before their final session. At that event, Merkel also noted her hope that the Conference would continue.

#### Secular Muslims Need to Organize

¶5. (SBU) Ates, who participated in the Conference as an individual with a secular background, noted that Schaeuble had recommended that secular participants get organized. She noted that because the religious Muslim organizations are organized into associations, they wielded more influence in the Conference. Ates stressed that secular Muslims should establish their own organization in the future to counterbalance the influence of other religious Muslim organizations in the Conference.

#### Recommendations, but Limited Concrete Results

¶6. (SBU) Posted on the Islam Conference website are the various conclusions and recommendations of the Conference and the fact that not all Conference participants could agree on various issues. One of the major Muslim organizations, the Islam Council, decided not to support the statements from the working groups on societal values or on security and Islamism, arguing that the latter left a general suspicion against Muslims, a view that other Muslim Conference associations did not share. Aslan noted that Schaeuble also wanted to show that we live in a democratic society and not all must agree on the Conference's final conclusions. Even

if participants did not agree on all issues and did not issue a joint declaration -- as the Interior Ministry had hoped -- Schaeuble said that "we fundamentally changed the relationship between the state and (Germany's) Muslim communities and initiated an integration process."

17. (SBU) The Ministry did publish a 32-page document on the recommendations and findings of the various working groups. These included:

- Guidelines on how to handle recurring problems facing Muslims in the Germany school system, such as wearing of headscarves and participation in school trips or sports lessons;

- Recommendations for promoting integration and common values, including promotion of tolerance and respect for other religious beliefs and world views;

- Agreement that Islamic religious instruction is to be introduced as a regular subject in public schools;

- A call for responsible and unbiased media coverage on Muslims and Islam, including more media coverage of everyday Islamic life in Germany;

- Emphasis on the importance of transparency as a basis for cooperation between Muslim organizations and governmental authorities, including increasing awareness and sensitivity with the Muslim population against extremist views;

- Launching of a new website on the Conference which informs the public about its work results and invites its users to participate actively in discussion fora.

#### Dresden Stabbing Raises Questions

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18. (C) The positive media coverage of and public attention to the Islam Conference after its final plenary has subsequently been overshadowed by the controversy surrounding the July 1 murder of Marwa el-Sherbini, an Egyptian woman who was fatally stabbed in a Dresden courtroom by a Russian-German man who the victim had sued for making anti-Muslim remarks (ref A). The federal government was criticized both domestically and from abroad, mainly in Egypt, for its handling of the case, with Muslim groups and Germany's Central Council of Jews accusing the government of not reacting to the perpetrator's apparent anti-Muslim motivation quickly enough. Commenting on the case to Poloff

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July 13, Ali Aslan said that while the Conference may have changed some views, "significant (societal) prejudices" still exist. Citing a study by the German Institute for Human Rights, Ali added that "Islamophobia is still widespread in Germany." He assessed that Muslims who wear headscarves, as had the victim, are perceived in Germany as representing a "radical" element of the Muslim community. He strongly criticized the media for portraying the incident in its immediate aftermath as a mere crime, rather than as one motivated by Islamophobia.

19. (C) Regarding his own ministry's reaction, Aslan (please protect) said that Schaeuble expressed the hope that the incident would not damage German-Egyptian relations. Aslan added that there were some in the MOI who thought that "Schaeuble could have made a stronger statement" and that it was a "wasted opportunity." Aslan assessed that the window of opportunity for the government to respond has now passed. He added that the only high level politician who attended the July 11 memorial gathering to El-Sherbini in Dresden, which attracted hundreds of people, was SPD Chairperson Franz Muntefering (see septel). Aslan also expressed disappointment in Greens party co-Chair Cem Oezdemir, of Turkish background, who he said also did not issue any strong

public statement regarding the murder. (Note: In fact, Greens Party co-Chairs Claudia Roth and Cem Oezdemir issued a strong statement on July 10 (some 10 days after the murder), in which they termed the murder "racist and Islamophobic" and extended their deepest sympathy to the family." They also called on the Interior Ministry "as initiator of the Islam Conference" and on state governments and civil society to "clearly condemn the Dresden deed..." End note.)

Comment

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¶10. (SBU) The tragic murder of Marwa El-Sherbini will likely continue to be a focus in Germany's Muslim population as it assesses how to address the problem of Islamophobia within German society and how to continue to sensitize the media and government to this problem. The Islam Conference was one important vehicle for the Muslim community to begin to address their concerns with the government and society at-large. The important beginning it has made and its work and recommendations cannot be denied or diminished by the El-Sherbini murder. This case, however, perhaps underlines even more strongly the need for the Conference to continue. Whether it does, as the Conference or in some other form, will be taken up by the next government, likely in October or November. If the new government does decide to continue the dialogue, we anticipate a close vetting of potential Conference participants to avoid the current difficulties surrounding the involvement of a number of Muslim umbrella organizations in the Conference which are under investigation for illegal activity and ties to overseas extremist groups (ref B).

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